Article:
Millar, Becky and Lee, Jonny (2021) Horror Films and Grief. Emotion Review. 171–182. ISSN 1754-0739

https://doi.org/10.1177/17540739211022815

ARTICLE

emotion review

Emotion Review
Vol. 13, No. 3 (July 2021) 171–182


ISSN 1754-0739
DOI: 10.1177/17540739211022815
https://journals.sagepub.com/home/emr

Horror Films and Grief

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Abstract

Many of the most popular and critically acclaimed horror films feature grief as a central theme. This article argues that horror films are especially suited to portraying and communicating the phenomenology of grief. We explore two overlapping claims. First, horror is well suited to represent the experience of grief, in particular because the disruptive effects of horror "monsters" on protagonists mirror the core experience of disruption that accompanies bereavement. Second, horror offers ways in which the experience of grief can be contained and regulated and, in doing so, may offer psychological benefits for the bereaved. While our focus will be squarely on film, much of what we say applies to other media.

Keywords
emotion regulation, grief, horror, narratives

Introduction

The horror genre is typified by two types of emotion it attempts to elicit in audiences: fear and disgust (e.g., see Carroll, 1990; Gaut, 1993; Hanich, 2010). Horror is thus well placed to represent and discuss social and psychological themes associated with such emotions. Beyond the surface-level threat posed by many horror antagonists—the sharp knife of the serial killer, the gnashing fangs of the werewolf—horror often concerns itself with the fears, anxieties, and traumas, real or perceived, that assail ordinary human existence. Grief is a key theme that falls under this rubric. This is reflected in some of the most high-profile horror films of the past 15 years, including *The Descent* (Marshall, 2005), *The Orphanage* (Bayona, 2007), *Lake Mungo* (Anderson, 2008), *The Babadook* (Kent, 2014), *It Follows* (Mitchell, 2014), *The Ritual* (Bruckner, 2017), and *Hereditary* (Aster, 2018), to name but a few. This recurrent contact between horror and grief has been recognized in popular film criticism (e.g., Covitz, 2019; Sheil, 2016; Srihari, 2018). At the same time, popular film criticism has tended to focus on dissecting the emotional authenticity of particular films. Meanwhile, philosophers and cognitive scientists studying horror have focused on the broad contours of the genre's appeal. This article goes some way to bridging the gap between these two tendencies, exploring the ways in which horror, as a genre, is especially effective at representing the experience of grief. In doing so, we offer a picture that helps unify the many disparate observations of how individual horror films effectively capture and communicate grief. While our focus will be squarely on film, much of what we say applies to other media.

We present and defend two overlapping claims. The first, weaker claim is that horror is exceptionally well placed to represent grief, given narrative features that are deeply embedded within the genre. More specifically, we argue that the use of antagonistic forces in horror—what we broadly refer to as "monsters"—is effective at representing the disruption to one's core, taken-for-granted beliefs or "assumptive world" that is characteristic of grief. This claim concerns the representative capacities of the horror genre, given its typical tropes and structures. Building on this, the second, stronger claim is that horror can offer psychological benefits for the bereaved. This concerns the cognitive/emotional effects on specific demographics consuming horror. Together, these claims suggest the relationship between horror and grief extends beyond the mere fact that grief is unpleasant, and horror is suited to exploring unpleasant things—analogous to the relationship between, say, adolescence and horror (e.g., De Palma, *Carrie*, 1976), sexual violence and horror (e.g., Scott, *Alien*, 1979), or racism and horror (e.g.,

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Peele, *Get Out*, 2017). Rather, the special relationship between grief and horror lies in the latter's ability to intimately capture and communicate the phenomenology of grief and, in doing so, help the bereaved make sense of their experience.

The article is structured as follows. First, we outline what grief is, concentrating on its narrative dimensions. Along the way, we distinguish between two narrative approaches to grief: the narrative structure approach to grief—where grief itself is understood as possessing a kind of narrative structure—and the narrative-as-a-tool approach—where narratives are understood as a device for restoring coherence to one's disrupted world as a result of bereavement. Next, in "Representing Grief Through Horror" we demonstrate how the role of monsters in horror is effective at representing the emotional experience of grief, using *The Babadook* (Kent, 2014) as a case study. Finally, "The Psychological Benefits of Horror" defends the idea that horror can offer psychological benefits to the bereaved by functioning as a means of narrative "containment" and emotional regulation for grief.

The Narrative Dimensions of Grief

Despite how commonplace bereavement is, the nature of grief is hard to pin down. This is in part because grief appears to manifest quite differently among subjects, and even within the same subject over time. Unlike many other emotional experiences, grief generally unfolds over many months or years, and there may be large temporal gaps during which grief is not actively experienced. It also seems to encompass numerous different types of emotional experience. Because of this, it is widely accepted that grief is a kind of temporally extended process (e.g., Goldie, 2011; Klass et al., 1996; Ratcliffe, 2017) that evolves over time, rather than a single emotional state.[1] Some philosophers have further argued that narratives play an especially important role in this process. However, there are two distinct types of approach that emphasize the role of narratives. The first is the narrative structure approach to grief, according to which grief itself is characterized by a particular kind of narrative structure (e.g., Goldie, 2011). The second is what we will call the narrative-as-a-tool approach, according to which we use narratives to help restore coherence to a changed and disrupted world (endorsed by researchers such as Higgins, 2013, 2020; Ratcliffe, 2017).

The narrative structure approach tells us that what individuates the grief process from other such processes is its structure. Peter Goldie (2011, see also 2002) provides a notable version of this approach, taking grief's narrative structure to be what unifies the temporally extended processes of grieving. For Goldie, our lives have an overarching narrative structure, allowing us to recount episodes from our lives in a meaningful way. Within this overarching structure, individual episodes like emotional experiences also each have a unified narrative structure:

> [W]ith emotional experience, it is the notion of narrative structure which ties together and makes sense of the individual elements of emotional experience—thought, feeling, bodily change, expression, and so forth—as parts of a structured episode; and in turn it underpins the way that individual emotional episodes relate to the emotion of which the episode is a part, and this emotion to mood, to character trait and to character, and to the person's life seen as a whole. (2002, pp. 4–5)

With regard to grief, the narratives that unfold thus explain how the process all "hangs together" as a meaningful and unified emotional experience (Goldie, 2011). Grief is taken to unfold in the form of a particular sort of pattern, which is said to be explanatorily prior to what is occurring at any given moment. Goldie thinks that grief's pattern is typified by a psychological correlate of a literary approach known as "free indirect style," which blends together multiple perspectives and, in particular, "exploits the ironic gap" between the internal perspective of a character and the external perspective of the narrator or author (2011, p. 129). When one grieves, their memories of their loved one are likewise colored by their knowledge that this person is now dead: "In grief, you might well remember the last time you saw the person you loved, not knowing, as you do now, that it was to be the last time. And this knowledge will infect the way you remember it" (2011, p. 131).

Thus, one's experience involves an intertwining of perspectives. Importantly, for Goldie, narratives of this form are inextricable from the grief process.

Goldie's narrative structure view thus makes a strong claim about the nature of the grief process, which has opened the approach to criticism. Ratcliffe (2017) has argued that the kind of narrative structure described by Goldie is not necessary for the grieving process. As Ratcliffe points out, grief comes in many different forms, making it hard to see what the characteristic narrative shape of grief could be. Moreover, Ratcliffe argues, grief may often be characterized by a lack of narrative coherence. He notes that grief is frequently described as involving disruption, discontinuity, and lack of coherence, particularly in cases of complicated grief (2017, p. 160).[2] Westlund agrees that "there is indeed an important sense in which the loss of a loved one is narratively intractable: it resists integration into a teleologically structured narrative arc with a beginning, a middle, and an end" (2018, p. 29).[3] Other researchers have likewise emphasized the disruptive and confusing nature of grief—an idea that we shall draw upon throughout this article. For example, Parkes (1988) argues that grief involves major alterations to one's "assumptive world"—one's taken-for-granted system of beliefs. The bereaved must revise their system of deeply held assumptions about the world. Attig (2011) relatedly argues that grief is a process of relearning one's world. Revising all of one's taken-for-granted beliefs about the world, and learning to live in a new reality, is likely to be a painstaking and slow process. Focusing on the profound disruption characteristic of grief seems to support the idea that grief is not (by necessity) characterized by a coherent narrative structure.

There is, however, a weaker claim that can be made about the role of narratives in grief. Various researchers have argued that narratives can be used to help the bereaved cope and restore coherence amid grief (e.g., Higgins, 2013, 2020; Ratcliffe, 2017). Such an approach does not require an account of grief's necessary conditions, or of how grief is unified and individuated from other processes. Instead, it emphasizes that narrative is a tool that is frequently employed throughout the grieving process. As Ratcliffe notes, "(some) people plausibly resort to narrative

in a distinctive way because things do not make sense. It is part of an attempt—willful or otherwise—to restore coherence" (2017, p. 160). Likewise, Higgins argues that "[T]hose who grieve make use of stories, which seem to assist the efforts to reorganize their lives, and this suggests that narrative structure, with its temporally unfurled character, is valuable to processing grief" (2013, p. 172). Psychologist Neimeyer (2005) relatedly tells us that narrative practices can aid grievers in a process of "meaning making," helping them to make sense of what has happened. Narratives can be used as a tool to restore coherence to a world that has been irrevocably changed.

Elsewhere, Higgins (2020) further argues that aesthetic practices, of which narrative practices are a subset, are ubiquitous in grief and that they can allow for its "containment." She provides a comprehensive discussion of the different senses in which grief might be "contained" by such practices: they allow emotions to be focused and expressed in a controlled way; they can help restore confidence in the world; they can serve as a means of connecting and communicating with both the living and the dead; and they can aid in attaining a sense of closure. They can help to restore coherence to our experiences as well as allowing for social connection. Of particular relevance for our purposes, she makes a suggestion about the role of the "ghost" figure, as presented in works of fiction and other media:

> My suggestion is that mainstream ideas about ghosts' characteristics and behavior reflect common features of bereavement and the confused thinking about the deceased that is often involved . . . [T]he ghost's nebulousness is itself reflective of one's unstable condition in bereavement, in which one fluctuates between feeling that the deceased is present and that he or she is absent, or present by virtue of the palpable absence. The ghost figure builds in this simultaneous sense of presence and absence along with other confusing notions that complicate the bereaved person's sense of the person who has died—the person's independence of efforts to hold on, the lack of location, the privileged epistemic vantage, and possible emotional estrangement. (Higgins, 2020, p. 15)

The claim that people often use narratives to cope with grief is more plausible than the claim that grief itself, by necessity, has a narrative structure. As we shall see, viewing horror films provides one type of narrative practice that may aid in the restoration of coherence and in the communication of the experience of grief to others. In what follows, we will explore further how horror tropes can both aid in accurately reflecting the phenomenology of grief and serve as a "vessel" for the containment and the communication of grief, to use Higgins's terminology. In doing so, we explore the psychology of watching horror films, considering the question of why the experience of horror should ever be positive and beneficial. We begin by looking at why horror is especially well placed to represent the experience of grief.

Representing Grief Through Horror

Monstrous Disruption and Disruptive Monsters

The horror genre is principally characterized by the purposeful elicitation of fear, disgust, and related emotions in its audience (e.g., Carroll, 1990; Gaut, 1993; Hanich, 2010). In turn, horror is thematically preoccupied with the targets of terror, trauma, anxiety, and the like. The representation and communication of such themes often gravitate around the antagonist of the story, that is, the monster. "Monster" is intended here in its broadest sense, referring to any antagonistic entity in the horror genre whose destructive power endangers human well-being or social order, typified by a grotesque physical body or psychological character (e.g., gross tentacles or lack of moral conscience). Monsters may be supernatural (e.g., ghosts and vampires) or mundane (e.g., serial killers and predatory animals).[4]

Monsters are the primary cause of fear and disgust in horror, both to the characters and the audience, insofar their appearance and behavior cause the characters and audience to feel scared and disgusted. However, we can distinguish between the primary fear and disgust caused by the monster's appearance or behavior and the fear and disgust related to the film's themes, though these usually overlap in ways that reinforce each other. Take the example of *Alien* (Scott, 1979). The Xenomorph poses an existential threat to the characters, communicated to them and the audience through its powerful and unnerving physiology; the full force of the Xenomorph's terrifying design lies in its embodying the recognizable properties of a dangerous predator while simultaneously displaying nonterrestrial properties, both in its surface-level appearance and its abnormal ontogeny—the "bizarreness of its metamorphic pathway" (Cruz, 2012, p. 164). By exploiting this design, the film elicits the fear of being hunted by a deadly but exotic animal. At the same time, *Alien* evokes the more ordinary fear surrounding sexual violence (e.g., Hurley, 1995). This is mostly achieved through visual association and allegory, for example, characters are impregnated with an egg via the throat, without consent, and forced to give birth at the expense of their own bodies. Specific physical features of the monster further signal this theme, with the use of penetrating inner mouths, phallic tails, and oozing bodily fluids. Thus, as *Alien* demonstrates, horror uses the characteristics of monsters to reinforce themes concerning more familiar targets of fear or disgust.

Human fears are multitudinous and there is practically no end to the sorts of terrors, traumas, and anxieties that horror takes aim at, from motherhood (e.g., Polanski, *Rosemary's Baby*, 1968) to consumerism (e.g., Romero, *Dawn of the Dead*, 1978) to xenophobia (e.g., Hong-jin, *The Wailing*, 2016). One especially prevalent theme, however, is grief. As mentioned before, there have been many horror films about grief, including some of the most popular and critically acclaimed horror films of all time: *Don't Look Now* (Roeg, 1973), *The Changeling* (Medak, 1980), *Pet Sematary* (Lambert, 1989), *The Descent* (Marshall, 2005), *Lake Mungo* (Anderson, 2008), *Antichrist* (Von Trier, 2009), *It Follows* (Mitchell, 2014), *The Invitation* (Kusama, 2015), *The Orphanage* (Bayona, 2007), *The Ritual* (Bruckner, 2018), *The Babadook* (Kent, 2014), *Hereditary* (Aster, 2018), and *Midsommar* (Aster, 2019).

More than simply another entry in the list of fears that horror concerns itself with, we contend that the tropes of horror are especially well suited to representing grief.[5] To appreciate this, we must recall the previous claim about the way in which grief

is characterized, in part, by a disruption to one's assumptive world (Parkes, 1988). As it happens, disruption to assumptive worlds is a core feature of horror narratives. Our central claim here is that the horror films under discussion use an unexpected monster as an effective way to represent the experience of grief; there is a parallel between the disruptive experience of grief for the bereaved and the disruptive effect of a monster's entry into the protagonist's life.[6] In arguing that horror can enable an enhanced appreciation of the phenomenology of grief by virtue of features of the genre, we make no claim that all horror films that involve a bereavement in the plot will succeed in doing so; some such films may use a protagonist's bereavement merely as a plot device and involve a rather shallow representation of grief. Nor do we claim that a horror film's ability to represent the phenomenology of grief dictates whether the film is aesthetically successful; for example, a film that offers a shallow representation of grief may nonetheless be a good horror film. Finally, as a larger issue we cannot do justice to here, we leave aside the precise relationship between authorial motivation and audience response in determining aesthetic success; however, given our claim about the power of horror films to communicate the phenomenology of grief, our focus is on interpretation rather than intent.

Horror films about grief, we suggest, often follow a common template. A typical structure involves some or all of the following stages:

1. The protagonist loses a loved one during the opening stages of Act 1 or prior to the events of the film. This establishes the protagonist's daily lived experience, which has been disrupted by the death of their loved one, demonstrated through the protagonist's emotional vulnerability as they struggle to cope with day-to-day tasks.
2. The monster appears (this arrival is often caused by, or is part of, the inciting incident). This radically disrupts the protagonist's understanding of reality and mirrors the disruption to the protagonist's assumptive world caused by bereavement.
3. The protagonist defeats, evades, or tames the monster and, in turn, restores some balance to their emotional life.

Well-known horror films about grief which follow all or most of this pattern include *Don't Look Now* (Roeg, 1973), *Changeling*, (Medak, 1980), *The Descent* (Marshall, 2005), *Lake Mungo* (Anderson, 2008), *The Babadook* (Kent, 2014), *Hereditary* (Aster, 2018), *Midsommar* (Aster, 2019), and many more. Let's examine this structure further.

"The Narrative Dimensions of Grief" detailed the ways in which grief involves emotional upheaval and, in turn, disruption to one's assumptive world. Stage 1 thus reflects fundamental emotional contours of grief and is expected in any film where grief is a central theme. Take the example of *Don't Look Now* (Roeg, 1973) in which protagonist John Baxter (Donald Sutherland) loses his daughter Christine (Sharon Williams) in the opening scene, after she drowns. In his article on horror and grief, screenwriter and director Steven Sheil (2016) observes this opening scene thusly,

> The most indelible image from the film, and one of the most truly horrific in cinema, comes early on, as Donald Sutherland rears up from the pond where his young daughter has just drowned. His face is a pure, agonized mask of grief and pain as he clutches onto her lifeless body. It's a moment that is all about crossing the threshold, being thrust suddenly and violently into a new world: the endless landscape of grief.

While perhaps not always portrayed with the same unflinching asperity as in horror films, Stage 1 is present in most nonhorror films about grief too, across different genres, including diverse works such as *Three Colors: Blue* (Kieślowski, 1993), *Secret Sunshine* (Lee, 2007), *Manchester by the Sea* (Lonergan, 2016), and *My Life as a Courgette* (Barras, 2016). However, as Sheil observes, the portrayal of Baxter's response at the death of his daughter is notably depicted as "horrific," and sincerely representing the characteristic horror of this initial stage of grief, we suggest, is typically reserved for horror films.

Most horror film plots feature the appearance of a monster of some kind. In this way, almost all horror films feature something analogous to Stage 2. What is unique to horror films about grief is the way the monster's arrival mirrors and extends the preexisting disruption to the protagonist's life through the death of a loved one. In general, horror monsters do not conform to the protagonist's established worldview because this abnormality—the monster's being out of place or appearing to be out of place—is essential to its power to cause fear, disgust, and related emotions. This abnormality is underlined by the monster's arrival from outside the expected metaphysical or social order. Recall that, as Parkes (1988) highlights, grief is partly characterized by the shattering of one's assumptive world, reflecting Sheil's characterization of the grieving Baxter in *Don't Look Now* (Roeg, 1973) as he is "thrust suddenly and violently into a new world." Monsters also shatter assumptions about the world, often suddenly and violently. The disruptive power of confrontation with the abnormal is not exclusive to horror; fantasy and science fiction sometimes highlight the unsettling effect on a protagonist who is thrust from the ordinary world into an abnormal one—their lives upended by contact with the extraordinary. However, it is noteworthy that many examples of this also feature grief as a key theme (and sometimes overlap with the horror genre), for instance, *The NeverEnding Story* (Peterson, 1984), *Labyrinth* (Henson, 1986), *Pan's Labyrinth* (del Toro, 2006), *A Monster Calls* (Bayona, 2016), and *Annihilation* (Garland, 2018).

The disruptive effect of monsters or related aspects of the abnormal—in horror or other genres—contrasts with instances of unusual creatures that superficially resemble monsters but are in some sense expected within the fictional world. For example, Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Jackson, 2001, 2002, 2003) is an existential threat to the peoples and social order of Middle Earth. To this extent, Sauron is a "monstrous" figure. However, Sauron is not out of place; he does not fall outside of the conceptual framework of our central characters

who accept, without resistance, his existence. Thus, Sauron is not intended specially to scare or disgust the audience. By contrast, the horror monster scares and disgusts the protagonist, and the audience by extension, partly by being unforeseen. This disruptive power within the narrative is harnessed by horror films to effectively represent grief. We believe it is no accident that horror films about grief typically feature monsters that are supernatural or otherwise especially anomalous. This is likely, in part, because such outlandish monsters are well suited for representing the disruptive nature of bereavement. In a phrase: the more unexpected, the more disruptive. Moreover, as Higgins highlights in her discussion of the ghost archetype (see discussion in "The Narrative Dimensions of Grief"), specific monster tropes seem apt to represent particular facets of this disruption.

Horror films often close with the protagonist overcoming the monster. By establishing the intimate connection between the protagonist's grief and the presence of the monster in their life, horror films about grief institute a narrative association between the resolution of the protagonist's emotional need and the resolution of the protagonist's struggle with the monster. Put otherwise, resolution of the secondary conflict (roughly, restoring some acceptable level of emotional stability following bereavement) is narratively tethered to resolution of the central conflict (roughly, overcoming the monster). Stage 3 is thus a typical feature of horror films about grief. Indeed, it is not only the outcome of the conflicts which are paralleled but the means by which they are resolved; the manner in which the monster is overcome is symbolic of how the protagonist adapts to their loss. Defeating, evading, or taming the monster requires the protagonist to accept its existence—which is often denied for much of the story—and confront the monster, mirroring the protagonist's need to accept the reality of their loss and to learn to live in an irrevocably altered world.

The Babadook (Kent, 2014) effectively illustrates these stages:

1. The story follows Amelia, who grieves the death of her husband Oskar who died in a car accident as he drove her to the hospital to give birth. Amelia is struggling to bring up their son Samuel as an only parent. Amelia is further exhausted by Samuel's constant nightmares which keep her awake.
2. Before bed one evening, Amelia reads Samuel a pop-up storybook titled "Mister Babadook" that he has found in his bedroom. The book is about a creature who terrorizes those who learn of his existence. A series of escalating events then take place. Amelia initially explains away these events as caused by Samuel (who blames the Babadook), but eventually Amelia sees the creature for herself. Events culminate when Amelia is possessed by the Babadook and tries to kill Samuel. Amelia attempts to strangle Samuel but stops after he gently strokes her cheek, causing her to reject the Babadook and regain control.
3. Amelia confronts the creature and traps him in the basement. Later, Amelia and Samuel are shown to have a more loving, stable relationship. Amelia visits the Babadook in the basement. The monster lashes out at her but backs off after Amelia placates it. Amelia returns to her garden to celebrate her son's birthday.

Besides meeting the three stages outlined before, it is worth noting a couple of other ways in which *The Babadook* connects the film's events and characteristics of the monster with Amelia's grief. Attention to these details helps illustrate how individual films build upon a generic structure by using devices suited to their plots (akin to *Alien*'s use of the Xenomorph's characteristics to enhance the theme of sexual violence). First, early on, Amelia attempts to destroy the pop-up book but soon discovers it on her doorstep mysteriously reconstructed. The book now contains new pages informing Amelia the creature will become stronger if its existence is denied. One interpretation of this plot point, we suggest, is that it represents the notion that attempting to deny or suppress one's grief is not sustainable.[7] Instead, as with the Babadook, one must eventually acknowledge, process, and adapt to one's loss (which Amelia does). Secondly, it is notable that Amelia never destroys the Babadook but instead captures it. The Babadook has not left Amelia; the creature is now a permanent fixture of her life. However, now she is in control. This mirrors the recognition that the bereavement will always be a part of Amelia's life. She learns to negotiate the loss as part of her new, ordinary life experience. Like the Babadook, the disruptive power of a bereavement is tamed.[8] Steve Covitz (2019) offers a similar observation:

> This is precisely how grief operates: turning away and leaving it unaddressed only tightens its grip. Much like the Babadook, it always stays with you and lurks in the corners of your thoughts, waiting for when you're most vulnerable to its torture. All this attention to the subtlety of Amelia's emotional life serves to augment the use of the monster as a metaphor for grief's disruptive power.

One might also draw a connection between Amelia's taming of the Babadook and various influential (although not uncontroversial) frameworks for understanding grief. That Amelia must return to the basement daily to feed the Babadook is reminiscent of Stroebe and Schut's (1999) "dual process" approach to coping with bereavement. According to this model, people come to terms with loss through an oscillation between focus on the loss (reflected by the Babadook itself) and upon restoration of one's life within an altered world (Amelia's ability to live her life once more). As time goes on, this model tells us that the focus of the bereaved turns increasingly to restoration rather than loss. That the Babadook remains indefinitely is also suggestive of certain ideas from the literature on "continuing bonds" with the dead. As part of this approach, continuing bonds theorists have argued against the notion that there is really an ultimate endpoint to grief and that people can or should fully "get over" a bereavement (e.g., see Rosenblatt, 1996). The continued existence of the Babadook in Amelia's life can be seen as a metaphor for such an understanding of grief.[9]

Does Fear Feel Like Grief?

As we have seen, the horror genre is especially well placed to represent the seismic shifts in people's worlds following a bereavement. One further question is whether the fear central to horror also captures an important facet of grief's phenomenology. Following his wife's death, C. S. Lewis wrote:

> No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing . . . And grief still feels like fear. Perhaps more strictly, like suspense. Or like waiting; just hanging about waiting for something to happen. It gives life a permanently provisional feeling. It doesn't seem worth starting anything. I can't settle down. I yawn, I fidget, I smoke too much. (1961, pp. 3, 33)

We might wonder whether grief and fear are alike in some way, and if so, whether the fear of both the protagonists and viewers of the horror film plays a role in the representation of grief.[10] Perhaps the fear generated by horror films could even, in some sense, "simulate" aspects of grief in the viewer, enhancing the film's capacity to communicate grief's phenomenology.

There are important differences between paradigmatic cases of emotions like fear and paradigmatic cases of grief. While fear can seemingly occur as a singular mental event or episode directed towards something frightening, as noted before, grief involves a complex process that unfolds over much more protracted periods of time. Nevertheless, there are two important ways in which the types of fear induced by horror may be phenomenologically connected to grief: first, fear is sometimes one component of the emotional process of grief, and second, fear and grief involve certain similar physiological responses.

With regard to the first of these possible connections between grief and fear, since grief is a complex process involving many different emotions, plausibly fear is (or can be) one of the emotions encompassed by the grief process. In fact, Parkes et al. (2015, p. 5) state that among the expressions of grief, "Crying, *fear* [emphasis added] and anger are so common as to be virtually ubiquitous and most cultures provide social sanction for the expression of these emotions in the funeral rites and customs of mourning which follow bereavement." Someone who has suffered a bereavement may be afraid of how their life will unfold without their loved one, and whether they will be able to cope. They may be afraid of losing other loved ones, or experience fear regarding their own mortality as part of their grief. Empirical work vindicates the claim that fear is often part of the grief process. For example, Barr and Cacciatore (2008) find a significant relationship between maternal grief and the fear of death. They break the fear of death down into several subtypes (fear of the unknown, fear of premature death, and fear of conscious death), all of which they find to be correlated with maternal grief. Likewise, in a study of widows whose husbands died suddenly, Conant (1996) tells us that, "There was a desperation, fear, and sense of personal threat in the grief following these deaths—an immanence of the threat to the widow's own mortality" (pp. 181–182). Bereaved children have been shown to often be fearful about the safety of remaining family members (e.g., Silverman & Worden, 1992), and Rosenblatt (1996) tells us that fear is among the reactions to loss that most commonly form a part of grief, which he takes to be an amalgamation of different emotional and cognitive reactions (p. 45). Such research suggests that fear in various guises is a frequent aspect of the grief process.[11] If this is correct, by generating fear in audiences, horror may then enable viewers to relate better to this particular facet of grief; by generating one of the common emotional components of grief, horror films help audiences in recognizing, and indeed somewhat experiencing, an aspect of grief.

A second way in which the fear invoked by horror may relate to the experience in grief is through giving rise to certain similar physiological reactions, regardless of whether fear is part of the grief process.[12] In the first systematic study of grief, Lindemann (1944) highlighted a very wide array of physiological features common among the bereaved. He found that acute grief was associated with many types of "somatic distress," including features such as respiratory disturbance, weakness, and "a feeling of tightness in the throat" (p. 141). Importantly, some such physiological features of grief are similar to those found in fear. Research has shown that acute grief is associated with stress responses, much like fear, rendering it unsurprising that there are certain similar physiological effects involved. For example, grief is associated with elevated heart rate and blood pressure, and an increase in the stress hormone cortisol (for review, see Buckley et al., 2012), all three of which are also associated with fear (e.g., Hayashi et al., 2009; Lerner et al., 2007). It has further been shown that such physiological changes are apparent in subjects' responses to fear-inducing films (Kreibig et al., 2007). The relationship between emotions and their physiological features is complex and controversial, and many different emotions involve an overlap in such features. Nevertheless, this does point towards another sense in which fear may capture certain facets of the experience of grief. This plausibly aids in horror's capacity to represent grief by enabling the viewer to experience some of the physiological reactions involved in the grief process.

This section presented the claim that horror films are especially effective at representing and discussing grief. This is principally because of a structural feature that is deeply embedded into the horror genre. Horror films often involve a monster whose arrival into the protagonist's life causes a serious disruption to their ordinary worldview. Monsters force the protagonist to realize that their fundamental understanding of what the world is like, is mistaken. This resembles the common feature of grief, outlined in the previous section, whereby the world of the bereaved has been disrupted. More strongly, we suggest there is a kind of "cognitive mirroring" between what the protagonist is made to feel by the monster's arrival and how the bereaved are made to feel during grief. This may be bolstered by horror's ability to give rise to experiences of fear that bear some phenomenological relation to aspects of the grieving process. In the next section, we will push this idea further, suggesting that the representative powers of horror films may sometimes offer psychological benefits for the bereaved.

The Psychological Benefits of Horror

Fear as a Rewarding Emotion

The previous section established that horror is well placed to represent grief. We now want to make the stronger claim that horror can provide a sort of containment for one's grief and, thus, offer a beneficial effect. Something to this effect has been gestured at in a recent string of popular articles on horror films about grief. For example, writing for *The New Yorker*, Eren Orbey comments on the role of horror in helping him cope with the murder of his father as a child. Commenting on the relatability of characters struggling with fear, he writes, "In my own experience, horror movies provided not an example for actions but an outlet for empathy, a chance to see characters contend with a kind of fear that my own peers could not fathom" (2016).

Before turning to the potential psychological benefits of horror for the bereaved, we will lay some groundwork by establishing a general account of why consuming horror can be an appealing and rewarding experience. By addressing the appeal of horror in general, we set the foundations for the narrower claim that it offers benefits for those who are grieving.

Recent decades have seen considerable philosophical and empirical investigation into the appeal of the horror genre. These investigations often begin with the "paradox of horror." The paradox revolves around the observation that, on the face of it, we shouldn't enjoy horror because it elicits emotions that are taken to be unpleasant. At the same time, many of us do enjoy horror. More formally:

1. Horror produces emotions such as fear and disgust.
2. Fear and disgust are unenjoyable emotions.
3. Audiences enjoy horror.

On the face of it, statements 1–3 are all true, yet these claims appear to be in tension with one another. There have been many different responses to the paradox, and we believe a complete answer will combine multiple factors, that is, we favor a pluralist account. For instance, some people may enjoy horror despite the unpleasant fear and disgust it causes, and the reasons why they enjoy one horror film may differ from the reasons why they enjoy another. At the same time, we concur with many theorists that fear and disgust are often central to horror's appeal. While, again, the nature of this appeal is not necessarily one-dimensional, the key claim for our purposes is that horror provides a kind of "safe space" in which to encounter fears and, thus, offers a rewarding experience. The idea that fear and disgust can be desirable or rewarding, given the context in which those emotions are encountered, finds support in much of the philosophical literature (e.g., Gaut, 1993; Smuts, 2009). One of the most developed versions of this idea comes from Bantinaki (2012), who argues the fear generated by horror need not possess an overall negative valence, even if it involves some unpleasant physiological symptoms and negative evaluative content.[13] In other words, statement 2 is false, and so the apparent paradox dissolves.

Bantinaki's (2012) solution to the paradox of horror is "integrationist," meaning it locates the attraction to horror in the emotional experience it elicits. Bantinaki further classifies her view as a "moderate hedonic view," insofar as it acknowledges that consuming horror is enjoyable. Such enjoyment is defined in terms of a "welcoming stance" the subject has toward their emotion, given the overall experience: "The overall hedonic character of an emotion, that is, is attitudinal; it signals a welcoming or disapproving stance toward what one is undergoing" (2012, p. 388). Though fear and other emotions that are usually construed as "negative" characteristically involve unpleasant physiological symptoms, such responses may accompany states with different valences depending on the mode in which we welcome or resist the experience in question. In short, fear can be part of a desirable or pleasant experience when that experience offers some net reward. As Bantinaki summarizes,

> [I]t is not the hedonic quality of bodily symptoms that determines an emotion's valence. Increased heart acceleration followed by constrained breathing, for instance, are signs of arousal, but they are bodily responses that, as noted above, can occur in both negative and positive emotions, for example, at the sight of a snake and the sight of a loved one. Even symptoms that are commonly acknowledged as pains—for example, queasiness—can occur in euphoric conditions, as, for instance, when one is having an orgasm. (p. 387)

We agree with Bantinaki that the paradox of horror loses its mystery when we recognize how fear and disgust do not imply an unpleasant experience even if they are accompanied by unpleasant physiological components. If horror is potentially beneficial and rewarding, then the emotions it elicits can be experienced positively.

Of course, it remains to be shown what rewards horror offers, and the conditions under which it offers them. Again, Bantinaki provides a plausible answer: horror gives us the opportunity to experience fear within a controlled environment (see also Morreall, 1985; Smuts, 2009). As we understand it, horror allows us to confront and explore fear in an environment with limited and predictable parameters, which one may willingly withdraw from either partially (e.g., closing one's eyes) or wholly (i.e., switching off the film or leaving the cinema). She writes,

> Through our encounter with horror fiction we are given a chance to confront or learn to cope with fear in a safe environment: we learn to control our fear feelings and display mastery over our reactions to frightening stimuli; to direct our thoughts—often aided by the narrative—to aspects of the situation that counter the fear (for instance, to the weak traits of the "monster" or to the resources that a protagonist has to confront it); or when the challenge is overwhelming, to manage it by seeking comfort in peers. (Bantinaki, 2012, p. 390)

The notion that control is vital for reaping horror's rewards is reflected in much of the popular writing on horror films and grief too. For example, in a conversation between Eren Orbey and Steven Marans (Director of the Childhood Violent Trauma Center at Yale University), Marans hypotheses that horror appeals to those with trauma precisely because of the control it offers them:

> You can turn away. You can turn down the volume. You can experience the level of arousal, the somatic sense of fear, and know in the back of

> your mind that it's not forever. We are sometimes drawn compulsively to the very things that scare us—as a method of mastering them. (Orbey, 2016)

It is worth noting that this account predicts that loss of control correlates with an overall negative experience when consuming horror. When one no longer possesses sufficient command over the parameters of the experience—perhaps one's physiological reactions become too potent, say, when one's heart beats too fast or one's palms become too sweaty—one's control is overridden, and the fear or disgust involved will convert to an overall negative experience.

The highly conditional nature of one's experience of fear and disgust conforms to the finding from the empirical literature that preferences for consuming horror vary greatly between individuals (e.g., Hoffner & Levine, 2005; Martin, 2019). Relevant factors appear to include empathic sensitivity, sensation-seeking, age, and gender. This supports the everyday observation that some people find horror very rewarding while others find it wholly disagreeable. However, preferences need not be binary, for example, one may enjoy some subgenres of horror and not others, and to a greater or lesser extent. We stress this because we believe whether one finds horror films about grief potentially beneficial depends on one's more general preference for the genre. Moreover, this research overlaps with the account just offered insofar as it helps uncover factors relevant to feelings of control. For example, lower empathy along certain dimensions may help to ensure one's physiological reactions are not overpowering (Martin, 2019). If one is too empathetic, for instance, one may lose the control required for a rewarding experience.

How Horror "Contains" and Regulates Grief

Thus far, we have established the general idea that horror can give rise to a positive or rewarding experience. Developing this, we will now offer a more targeted theory which suggests horror is capable of offering a psychological benefit for the bereaved.[14] As discussed above, a number of researchers have emphasized how narrative and aesthetic practices may help the bereaved to better understand and cope with their loss (e.g., Higgins, 2013, 2020; Neimeyer, 2005; Ratcliffe, 2017). Kathleen Higgins argues that aesthetic practices allow for the "containment" of grief, in that they "facilitate restoration of coherence to our experience, as well as reconnection with the social world and recovery from the breakdown that profound loss involves" (2020, p. 9). Horror films are well placed to facilitate this kind of "containment" in a number of ways, and this may help with the process of making sense of one's changed world following a bereavement. We further argue that horror films can, through their narrative structures, play a role in the regulation of one's emotions that is beneficial to the bereaved.

First, due to horror films accurately representing a number of important features of grief, particularly with regard to the disruption to one's world (as argued in the previous section), horror can help one to make sense of an experience that is otherwise incomprehensible. As Ratcliffe (2017) and Higgins (2020) note, narrative and aesthetic practices may aid in the process of comprehension that is integral to grief. In the case of horror, the films often accurately reflect important aspects of the phenomenology of grief and, in doing so, provide expression for a nebulous experience that is difficult to grasp. Grief often involves a sense of isolation and detachment, and watching a film that conveys the horror of grief may help one to feel less alone and to communicate the experience of bereavement to others. The monsters of horror give a tangible (albeit symbolic) face to a sense of unreality and disruption. As Higgins notes of the ghost archetype, plausibly the ghosts' "characteristics and behavior reflect common features of bereavement and the confused thinking about the deceased that is often involved" (2020, p. 15). She takes their scary and alien qualities to reflect, for example, the sense that we no longer know deceased loved ones in their new form, and their nebulousness to reflect how "one fluctuates between feeling that the deceased is present and that he or she is absent, or present by virtue of the palpable absence" (2020, p. 15). Elsewhere, researchers have highlighted that various other monsters, such as zombies and vampires, likewise appear to occupy a liminal space between life and death (Davis & Crane, 2015), and so similar remarks may apply to these horror archetypes.

Another way in which horror films can enable communication and allow bereaved people to feel less alone is simply by virtue of their willingness to explore the topic of death. People often ignore death until its reality is forced upon them through an experience of bereavement, and they may discover others find it hard to discuss this with them. In horror films, the reality of death is confronted head on, which may serve to make the bereaved feel less alone, aiding a sense of connection with the social world. As Davis and Crane (2015, p. 427) argue, "Horror stories offer a narrative arena in which to develop a dialogic relationship with death and to fathom what mortality means as beings living to die"; in this way, the horror genre is representative of our "struggle to reconcile life and death." Horror's willingness to tackle this topic provides another way in which it can aid in the "containment" of grief.

Plausibly, horror films do not only benefit the bereaved in facilitating connections with the social world. They can also shape one's own emotional experiences in important ways. A number of researchers have argued that the surrounding world and aesthetic practices can serve to "scaffold" our affective experiences, playing a role in the regulation of our emotions (Colombetti & Krueger, 2015; Krueger, 2014). Practices such as listening to music, for example, can help to shape the ways our affective experiences unfold over time. Colombetti and Krueger tell us that music is able to "vent or give voice to emotions" and thus we "delegate" certain regulatory tasks to it (2015, p. 1162). Horror films, we argue, are well placed to scaffold a bereaved subject's emotions: they can "give voice" to experiences characteristic of grief due to their ability to represent the experience (as suggested by our discussion in "Representing Grief Through Horror"), and play a regulatory role. In particular, they seem to be effective in providing a

temporary narrative structure to one's emotional experience. While grief may often be characterized as involving a lack of narrative coherence, films provide a narrative structure, and this may help to shape our emotional experience.

One way to develop this approach is provided by Velleman (2003), who argues that the ups and downs of narratives are felt through patterns of arousal and resolution. He suggests that a horror story might be understood emotionally in terms of initial puzzlement that gives way to horror, which finally gives way to relief (2003, p. 13). These "emotional cadences" are, for Velleman, not just random emotions pieced together, but rather ones that follow distinctive and familiar trajectories. In this way, horror films can help to shape one's emotions into such a trajectory. Due to similarities between fear and aspects of grief's phenomenology (highlighted in "Does Fear Feel Like Grief?"), the emotional cadences induced through horror are congruent with (but less disrupted and chaotic than) certain emotional experiences characteristic of grief, thus helping to provide a kind of coherence to them. As we noted in the previous section, the way that emotions unfold through the consumption of horror also occurs in a "safe" environment, allowing for a sense of control that is likely lacking while grieving. It does not seem to be necessary that grief is narratable in the way suggested by Goldie (2011), but it does seem that the emotional experience of grief can be regulated and structured through the use of narratives.

We can also use narrative and aesthetic practices in an attempt to trigger emotional effects while experiencing an absence of affective responses. Roberts (2019) tells us that emotional numbness consists in a "systematic mismatch between the presence of things that ought to be affectively significant for me, and the absence of my emotional response to those things" (p. 192). According to Roberts, grief can consist in a global emotional absence of this sort (p. 193). In addition to employing regulative practices to control and adapt unpleasant emotions, we also use such practices to elicit emotions:

> [A] state in which there is a felt absence of emotion can prompt the deployment of regulative mechanisms as well. The grieving person, for example, may act upon her environment in order for it to elicit an emotional effect upon her, when she has felt nothing for too long. (2019, p. 195)

Thus, one final way in which horror films may have a beneficial effect for the bereaved is in their ability to enable us to feel something. As Bantinaki tells us,

> Fear makes us feel alive: our senses are alert; our heart is bouncing; our attention is highly focused. The increased arousal of horror-induced fear is invigorating and can be experienced as a reward, especially if one wants to break the emotional routine. (2012, p. 390)

Horror films are especially well placed to induce some kind of affective response when one's emotions are dampened, thus potentially serving a regulative role for those experiencing emotional numbness due to grief.

Engaging with a horror film may help to modulate and frame one's experiences of grief, temporarily providing them with a more coherent emotional and narrative structure. Horror may also allow the bereaved to feel some kind of affective response even while in the depths of emotional numbness. The regulative potential of horror films may then be beneficial for those suffering the emotional upheaval of bereavement.

Conclusion

This article explored the relationship between horror films and grief. We suggested the thematic preoccupation of horror films with grief is due to more than coincidence or the general fact that horror is well suited for themes surrounding fears, anxieties, and trauma. First, horror is especially suited to represent the experience of grief given genre tropes. In particular, the disruptive effects of a monster on the protagonist's assumptive world within a horror story capture well the core experience of disruption that accompanies bereavement. Second, horror offers ways in which the experience of grief can be contained and regulated and, in doing so, may offer psychological benefits for the bereaved.

Throughout the article, we saw how work within the broader philosophical and scientific research on horror accords with our claims. Future research may help develop these ideas with further direct empirical support. For instance, that horror sometimes functions as a kind of containment vessel for grief, and that this function may vary depending on the stage of one's grief, may be further evaluated via qualitative interviews with the bereaved.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Matthew Ratcliffe, Jamie Cawthra, Rob Davies and Henry Schiller for providing feedback on this article. We also thank an anonymous reviewer and the journal editor W. Gerrod Parrott for their helpful comments. This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (grant ref. AH/T000066/1).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1 Taking grief to involve a process does not imply that it is a process with generalizable and clearly delineable stages, such as those posited by Kübler-Ross (1969): denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

2 See also Ratcliffe's (2019) discussion of the ways in which grief involves the negotiation and comprehension of dramatic disturbances to one's experiential world.

3 Westlund (2018) argues that despite this important sense of narrative intractability, grief may allow for a different kind of narratability that, unlike paradigmatic narratives, resists narrative closure. This may be true of certain grief experiences. However, Westlund still holds that, "Contra Goldie, it is not clear that the correct account of grief will be best described as a narrative account" (p. 36), and we think that the objections to the claim that a narrative structure is a necessary component of grief still stand.

4 This definition contrasts with the narrower sense of "monster" which refers only to unnatural, supernatural, or otherwise otherworldly entities. For example, this narrower sense is implicit in Carroll's (1990) popular taxonomy of monsters. Our notion encompasses the likes of Carroll's "fusion," "fission," "magnification," "massification," and "uncanny" categories, but also includes the more pedestrian murderer (e.g., Norman Bates in Hitchcock's *Psycho*, 1960) or deadly animal (e.g., the shark in Spielberg's *Jaws*, 1975). As it happens, most horror films about grief do concern supernatural monsters, for reasons outlined next. There are exceptions to this general rule, for instance, *Midsommer* (Aster, 2019), where the monster may be construed as a human cult with no demonstrable supernatural power.

5 One might think grief is frequently referenced in horror films simply because it is a strongly unpleasant and relatable experience that primes audiences in the appropriate way—an emotional shortcut to an atmosphere or mood that facilitates fear. We aim to demonstrate that there is a stronger connection between horror and grief than this would suggest, however, it is worth recognizing that our claim is compatible with the notion that references to grief also serve a simpler "priming" function. Our thanks go to an anonymous reviewer for pressing us on this issue.

6 As Parkes (1988) makes clear, bereavement is not the only traumatic circumstance under which one's assumptive world may be disrupted. Horror may also be well placed to represent other such experiences.

7 While suppression of painful feelings may be adaptive in the acute stages of grief, persistent avoidance is associated with what has been termed "complicated grief"—a pathological form of grief that occurs in around 7% of the bereaved population (Baker et al., 2016).

8 Horror films about grief that do not feature "happy endings" include *Don't Look Now* (Roeg, 1973), *The Descent* (Marshall, 2005), and *Verónica* (Plaza, 2017).

9 Other aspects of the continuing bonds framework do not seem to be reflected here. While continuing bonds theorists often treat continued connection with the deceased as positive and enriching for the bereaved (e.g., Klass et al., 1996), the continued existence of the Babadook does not appear to enrich Amelia's life, even though the threat is contained. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this issue to us.

10 Here, Lewis also draws a connection between grief and experiences such as "suspense." It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the connections between fear and suspense, and Lewis's varied analogies may simply reflect the varied aspects of the grief process, but it is worth noting that many have taken there to be a close connection between these experiences. For example, some take fear to be an essential component of suspense (e.g., Ortony et al., 1988, p. 131).

11 Here, we cannot address in any depth the thorny question of whether such instances of fear are truly part of the grief process or merely frequent accompaniments to it. Whether it is even possible to separate some kind of "pure" grief process (composed of multifarious emotional components) from other emotions that constitute one's reaction to bereavement is unclear. The possibility of unconscious emotions adds further complications here, that is, it is hard to assess whether or not fear is always a component of grief, but it is simply not always phenomenologically evident.

12 That horror can facilitate physiological responses akin to those involved in grief may be of value both to filmmakers invested in conveying grief's phenomenology and to audiences who wish to better understand grief. We do not believe that simply watching a film is likely to induce an experience of grief itself, at least insofar as grief is understood as a protracted emotional process (rather than a straightforward emotion), which generally unfolds over many weeks, months, or years. Evoking certain reactions typical of grief goes some way, however, towards communicating this complex emotional experience.

13 Here, we do not take a stance on the question of whether emotions are to be individuated in terms of physiological "feelings," some kind of evaluative appraisal, or through some hybrid or alternative approach. One can agree with Bantinaki's claim that the overall valence of an emotion is not fully determined by either physiological changes or evaluative content, while still adopting any one of these positions with regard to the question of what makes a token emotion an example of a particular type.

14 Although our focus is bereavement, research suggests that viewers of horror films are more resilient to other kinds of events. For example, according to a recent study, horror fans have coped better with the COVID-19 pandemic (Scrivner et al., 2021). Scrivner et al. suggest this may be because horror allows audiences to engage with "negative" emotions like fear in a safe setting.

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